

The Mongols

The Song dynasty was overcome in the thirteenth century by the Mongols, a society of pastoral nomads from the steppes of Central Asia. By the end of their period of dominance in the fifteenth century, the Mongols had conquered China, Persia, and Russia, controlling the largest land empire in history. In establishing their empire, the Mongols facilitated the flow of trade between Europe and Asia and brought bubonic plague to three continents.

Accomplished horsemen, the Mongols typified the numerous nomadic bands that migrated throughout Central Asia in search of grazing lands for their livestock. To supplement the meat and dairy products provided by their herds, the Mongols traded with settled agricultural peoples for grain and vegetables. The basic unit of Mongol society was the tribe; when warfare threatened, tribes joined together to form confederations. Although men held tribal leadership roles, Mongol women had the right to speak in tribal councils. Throughout their history, the Mongols were masters of the intrigues of **steppe diplomacy**, which involved alliances with other pastoral groups and the elimination of rivals, sometimes rivals within one's own family.

Early Mongol influence on China had begun as early as the twelfth century, when the Mongols defeated an army from Qin China sent to repel their advances. The leader credited with organizing the Mongols into an effective confederation was Temujin, who was renamed Chinggis Khan when he was elected the ultimate ruler, or *Khan*, of the Mongol tribes in 1206. A master at motivating the Mongol tribes, Chinggis Khan managed to break individual clan loyalties and construct new military units with allegiance to himself as their leader.

In addition to their unparalleled horsemanship, the Mongols became masters of the shortbow. Mongol contact with the Chinese also introduced them to other weapons of war such as the catapult, gunpowder, cannons, flaming arrows, and battering rams. By the time that Chinggis Khan died in 1227, the Mongols controlled an empire that extended from northern China to eastern Persia.

As they consolidated their empire, the Mongols were more preoccupied with collecting tribute than with administering their newly acquired territories. They were generally tolerant toward the religious beliefs and practices of the people they conquered and sometimes eventually adopted the dominant religion of their subject peoples.

Expansion of the Mongol Empire into Russia

The Mongol conquests continued after the death of Chinggis Khan, reaching Russia by 1237. From that year until 1240 the Mongols, or Tartars as the Russians called them, executed the only successful winter invasions of Russia in history. Cities that resisted Mongol advances saw their inhabitants massacred or sold into slavery. The once-prosperous city of Kiev was burned to the ground. The effects of the Mongol occupation of Russia were numerous:

- The Mongols set up a tribute empire called The Golden Horde.
- Serfdom arose as peasants gave up their lands to the aristocracy in exchange for protection from the Mongols.
- Moscow benefited financially by acting as a tribute collector for the Mongols. When neighboring towns failed to make their tribute payments, the princes of Moscow added their territory to the principality of Moscow.
- They strengthened the position of the Orthodox Church by making the **metropolitan**, or head of the Orthodox Church, the head of the Russian church.
- Mongol rule kept Russia culturally isolated from Western European trends such as the Renaissance. This isolation denied Russia opportunities to establish both commercial and cultural contacts with the West, in a situation that fostered misunderstanding through the modern period.

After establishing their presence in Russia, the Mongols went on to their next goal: the conquest of Europe. After an attempted conquest of Hungary in 1240 and raids in Eastern Europe, the Mongols withdrew to handle succession issues in their capital of Karakorum in Mongolia. The proposed conquest of Europe never materialized.

The Mongols in Persia

After abandoning their plans to add Europe to their empire, the Mongols turned to conquest within the world of Islam. In 1258, the city of Baghdad was destroyed and Persia added to the portion of the Mongol Empire known as the Ilkhanate. Among the approximately 800,000 people slaughtered in the capture of Baghdad was the Abbasid caliph. With his murder, the Islamic dynasty that had ruled Persia for about 500 years ended. Another group of Islamic peoples, the Seljuk Turks, had been defeated by the Mongols in 1243, weakening their dominance in Anatolia. The resulting power vacuum facilitated the conquest of Anatolia (present-day Turkey) by the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century. The Mongol threat to the Islamic world ended in 1260 at the hands of the Mamluks, or slaves, of Egypt.

The Mongols in China

In China, the Mongols under the leadership of Kubilai Khan, a grandson of Chinggis Khan, turned their attention to the remnants of the Song Empire in the southern part of the country. By 1271, Kubilai Khan controlled most of China and began to refer to his administration of China as the **Yuan dynasty**. The Yuan dynasty would administer China until its overthrow by the **Ming dynasty** in 1368. Under Mongol rule:

- The Chinese were forbidden to learn the Mongol written language, which was the language of official records under the Yuan dynasty.
- Intermarriage between Mongols and Chinese was outlawed.
- The Chinese civil service examination was not reinstated.
- Religious toleration was practiced.
- Chinese were allowed to hold positions in local and regional governments.
- Mongol women enjoyed more freedoms than Chinese women, refusing to adopt the Chinese practice of footbinding. Mongol women also were allowed to move about more freely in public than were Chinese women. Toward the end of the Yuan dynasty, however, the increasing influence of Neo-Confucianism saw greater limits placed on Mongol women.
- The Yuan used the expertise of scholars and artisans from various societies.
- Foreigners were welcome at the Yuan court. Among visitors to the Mongol court were the Venetian Marco Polo and his family. Marco Polo's subsequent account of his travels, perhaps partially derived from other sources, increased European interest in exploring other lands.
- Merchants were accorded higher status in the Mongol administration than they had under the Chinese.
- The suppression of piracy furthered maritime trade.
- Attempts at expansion culminated in the unsuccessful invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1280 and a brief occupation of Vietnam. The attempted invasions of Japan were turned back by treacherous winds known to the Japanese as divine winds, or *kamikaze*.

By the mid-fourteenth century, the court of Kubilai Khan weakened as it became more concerned with the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth than with efficient administration. Banditry, famine, and peasant rebellion characterized the last years of the Yuan until their overthrow by a Chinese peasant who founded the Ming dynasty.

The Impact of Mongol Rule on Eurasia

The most significant positive role of the Mongols was the facilitation of trade between Europe and Asia. The peace and stability fostered by the Mongol Empire, especially during the **Mongol Peace** of the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries, promoted the exchange of products that brought increased wealth to merchants and enriched the exchange of ideas between East and West. Along the major trade routes, merchants founded diaspora communities that fostered cultural exchange. Among them were Jewish communities along the Silk Roads and the Mediterranean in addition to settlements of Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia. New trading posts and empires encouraged European peoples to later invest in voyages of exploration.

Long-distance travel increased. Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan Muslim scholar, travelled throughout the Muslim world, including Central Asia, China, Southeast Asia, Spain, and East Africa. His journal, as well as the writings of Marco Polo, became valuable resources in the study of cultural exchange in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Another exchange brought about unintentionally by the Mongols proved devastating to Europe, Asia, and Africa: the spread of bubonic plague. It is possible that the plague entered Mongol-controlled territories through plague-infested fleas carried by rats that helped themselves to the grain in Mongol feedsacks. The bubonic plague, known also in Europe as the **Black Death**, spread across the steppes of Central Asia to China, where it contributed to the weakening and eventual fall of the Yuan dynasty. In the mid-fourteenth century, the plague also spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. The disease followed Eurasian and African trade routes as merchants carried it from city to city and port to port. As many as 25,000,000 people may have died from plague in China, and Europe lost about one third of its population; the Middle East also suffered a large death toll. Significant loss of life among Western European serfs helped deal a final blow to manorialism in that region. Some plague-devastated areas required 100 years or more to recover population losses and economic and urban vigor.

Further Nomadic Influences

With the decrease of Mongol dominance in Eurasia came a final nomadic thrust by Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane, a Turk from Central Asia. Although his capital city at Samarkand was noted for architectural beauty, his conquests were known only for their incredible brutality. From the mid-1300s until his death in 1405, Tamerlane spread destruction across Persia, Mesopotamia, India, and a part of southern Russia. His death marked the final major thrust of nomadic peoples from Central Asia into Eurasia.

Encounter and Exchange in Africa: The Bantu Migrations

Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed an exchange of ideas, technology, and language through the migrations of the Bantu-speaking peoples. About 2000 B.C.E., small numbers of agrarian peoples from the edge of the rain forest in present-day Nigeria began migrating from their homeland, perhaps as a result of population pressures. The migrations escalated throughout the period from 500 B.C.E. to 1000 C.E., and continued until about 1500 C.E.

As the Bantu peoples migrated southward and eastward throughout sub-Saharan Africa, they spread the knowledge of the agricultural techniques that they brought from their homeland. Following the course of the Congo River, they farmed the fertile land